

SIWARD – SIGURD – SIGFRID?

The career of an English missionary in Scandinavia

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In the course of editing and translating Goscelin's *Life and Miracles of St Ivo* I was presented with the problem of identifying one "bishop Siward", a matter which drew me into the uncertainly charted depths of mediaeval Scandinavian history.

The passage reads as follows:

Bishop Siward dedicated the famous church to blessed Ivo and his companions very festively at the invitation of abbot Eadnoth. Siward was the man whose worth as a soldier of Christ had been proved with brother Wlfrid of Ramsey Abbey through deep perils of the sea and heathen nations. Together they were unconquerable by many persecutions and insults; they sought out a tribe and gained it for the saviour, and at last, when their swordsman failed them, they returned to England.

(Chronicon Ramesciensis)

This description of the dedication of the chapel at Slepe in Huntingdonshire, England was written between 1087 and 1091 by the hagiographer Goscelin, drawing, according to his own account, on an earlier *Life of St Ivo* written by Abbot Andrew (c1020) and on oral testimony of the monks of Ramsey Abbey. The bones of the (legendary) saint were discovered in 1001 or 1002 and Eadnoth's abbacy ended when he became bishop of Dorchester in 1006, so the date is quite narrowly and securely defined.

The "gladiator deficiens" is surely a reference to Olav Tryggvason's death (or disappearance) in the course of the battle of Svoldur in 1000. In passing we may note the excellently descriptive noun – since Olav's methods of conversion are known to have been unsubtle – and the informative participle: Olav's fate a mystery then as now.

Traditionally Olav Tryggvason recruited missionaries in England in about 995 and they were led by one Siward. There are however no contemporary sources to bear witness to this. The earliest evidence is from Adam of Bremen, who was writing in the 1070s in Germany. His two references to Olav's bishop call him Jon:

Others say that of old and at this time certain bishops and priests of England left their home for the sake of doing mission work and that they baptized Olaf and others. Among these missionaries the principal one was a certain bishop John, and there were others who must be mentioned later.

(Bk2, 35)

The first bishop, a certain John, came from England to Norway, and he converted and baptized the king with his people.

(Bk4, 33)h

The next fragment of evidence is a full century later, in the Icelandic sagas. Snorri Sturluson(1179-1241), using earlier accounts of Ari Thorgilsson (1067-1148), Oddr Snorrason (c1190) and Gunnlaugr Leifsson (d1218/9) as well as oral testimony, has an influential court bishop who assisted Olav Tryggvason against Eyvind and the sorcerer Ruath. In the latter incident the name Bishop Sigurth is given, but not the bishop's nationality.

It is not until the mid-thirteenth century, when the "Great saga of Olav Tryggvason" is thought to have been compiled, that the identification is explicit:

The King's Bishop, Sigurd, known as Sigurd the Great, whom he had brought with him from England, was a wise and good man and a great scholar.

(Ch 107)

Sigurd is influential: he sleeps "in the closet next to the King's bed" and when Olav dies or disappears he advises Queen Thyri in her fasting.

The passage in Goscelin is good supporting evidence for the identification of the sagas' Sigurd with Adam's John. It confirms his English provenance in the "returned" ("in Angliam reversi sunt"). We may speculate whether John was a baptismal name or name in religion adopted by Sigurd, or if conversely the name Sigurd (or a variant) was acquired in Scandinavia by the "guardian of victory" (ie of Christianity). The Wlfred who had accompanied Sigurd on his mission does not seem to have been commemorated elsewhere.

If the identification of Siwardus with Jon-Sigurd may be regarded as established, there is then further doubt as to the rest of his career following his return to England. Several attempts have been made to show that Jon-Sigurd of Norway and St Sigfrid of Sweden were the same man (eg by Opperman). A passage in Adam of Bremen (Bk2, 55) has been interpreted in this way:

(Olaf) had with him many bishops and priests of England by whose admonitions and teaching he prepared his heart to see God, and he committed his subjects to their direction. Of their number, Siegfried, Grimkill, Rudolf

and Bernhard were noted for their learning and virtues. At the king's command they also went to Sweden, Gothia, and all the islands beyond Norway, preaching the word of God ... to the barbarians.

Leaving Adam aside, a thirteenth-century Swedish manuscript (ed Schmid) gives the earliest and simplest version of the legend of St Sigfrid, which reads:

At that time there was a king in Sweden, Olaf by name, who, though a pagan, yet bore a faithful soul. He asked the king of the English to send him someone instructed in the complete Christian faith. Therefore blessed Sigfrid went to the king of Sweden at the request of the king of the English. Moreover the king was delighted to meet him and received him with honour.

This first account refers only to the "King of the English" and a simple request for a missionary and compliance with it; in its re-castings the legend acquired apocryphal trappings which have served to throw doubt on the whole proceedings. In a late fourteenth century version the English king calls a council and, reluctantly, St Sigfrid archbishop of York volunteers to go, making his journey via Denmark.

A Danish manuscript of the fifteenth century names the English king Mildred (for Aethelred?) and repeats the error which has Sigfrid archbishop of York – such he surely was not.

Returning to the earliest, Swedish version of the legend: it contains nothing which is inherently improbable, unless it is the goodwill between Olaf and Aethelred. There is some likelihood that bishop Sigurd, at a loose end and independent of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, was proving an embarrassment to the English king and therefore he may have welcomed the opportunity to send him back to Scandinavia to exercise his talents as a missionary.

Sigfrid may well have spent a little time at the Danish court (the king was married to Olaf's daughter) before proceeding to Sweden. There he baptized the Swedish king. According to legend he had with him three nephews who were killed in Vaerend. Sigfrid found their heads (and listened to their miraculous speech according to a later version) and founded a church on the spot. He died as bishop of Växjö, in Southern Sweden, at a very great age, between 1060 and 1070.

More evidence to link the careers of Sigurd in Norway and Sigfrid in Sweden cannot be adduced, unless it is "the details of ritual and organization in which the English and Scandinavian churches resemble each other. Few of them can be found in Denmark, where the ecclesiastical influence of Germany was always strong. But in Norway and Sweden they are numerous and clear enough to show that the men who founded the national churches knew and respected English practice." (F M Stenton)

The editors of the *Scriptores Rerum Suecicorum* in 1828, and P Grosjean in 1939 are respected authorities who warn against identifying Sigurd and Sigfrid on the fragmentary evidence which survives. I would reiterate that the evidence of Goscelin adds only a tantalizing detail to the corpus. It is, however, interesting because it places Sigurd in the right place at the right time to be co-opted for the conversion of Sweden by Olaf Skattkonung and to achieve canonisation as St Sigfrid.

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